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UNITED STATES AND THIS WAR:

A WORD IN SEASON.

SPEECH

DELIVERED BY

SIR GILBERT PARKER, M.P.,

TO THE

PILGRIMS' SOCIETY,

AT THE SAVOY HOTEL, LONDON.

ON THE 15th APRIL, 1915,

ON THE OCCASION OF THE 50th ANNIVERSARY

OF THE DEATH OF

ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

LONDON:
DARLING & SON, LIMITED.

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The United States and this War: A Word in Season.

War is the supreme test of the qualities of a nation, and it will be admitted by independent opinion in neutral countries that the people of Great Britain have stood the test well. Peace has its great tests also, and the country that stands outside the ring of fighters is tested almost as searchingly as any belligerent country. The belligerent country has not to weigh its every action with exquisite nicety, because war gives wide liberty, though it still must walk with guarded footsteps where neutral nations are concerned; it must have strict regard for their rights under the rules of International Law and the long precedents of naval warfare. The neutral country, however, which stands, as it were, between the combatants holding the balance level, has a task that tests its statesmanship and the character of its people as it is never tested in ordinary peace times, or in ordinary war times. In this extraordinary war, the American Government and American people have been supremely tested, and they have stood the test nobly. The United States—the chief of all the neutral nations—has a gravely important part to play both from the moral and from what may be called, the political side.

Four of the greatest nations of the world are at war, and it is natural that each of the two sets of belligerents wish for the moral support of ninety millions of people, whose power through their Government to affect the ultimate result of the war by their influence with other neutral countries, cannot be over-estimated. Official bias in dealing with questions such as contraband, purchase of ships, blockade, and so on, towards either combatant—a preference which would be a variation from the strict rules of neutrality from the mercantile side, affecting supplies of all kinds —would have as serious an effect upon the ultimate decision of the war as active participation. It must be said that, in a position of immense delicacy, the United States has interpreted her official neutrality with an unimpeachable fidelity to long established rules. The position is not a new one. Every great neutral nation in turn has had to face the same delicate and intricate problems in time of war, and every Government one time or another, has been attacked by the people of its own country as well as by the belligerents for not departing from strict neutrality to meet a by no means strictly controlled public sentiment.

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Never, however, since the rules controlling the conduct of nations in time of war have taken form, either by precedent or by the written rule of the Declaration of Paris, has any neutral nation had to face the difficulties attached to its neutrality such as have faced the United States since August, 1914. She has had to make protest, or to seek explanation, of acts of naval warfare of this country in which there were certainly elements of anxiety for our Foreign Office and the Government; but, whether it was the question of the *Dacia* and the purchase of ships, of the *Wilhelmina* and contraband, or the new blockade, which differed from other blockades of the past in that it was wider in area and yet less severe upon neutrals, a temperateness, a courtesy, and a moderation, have been shown for which this country cannot be too grateful.

That temperateness, moderation, and courtesy, however, have not by a hair's breadth infringed the rights of our foes under International Law. Since this war began there has breathed through the official actions of the American Government in relation to this country the spirit of Abraham Lincoln; and no higher tribute can be paid to any Government than that.

At the time of the Civil War, a most delicate question arose between the United States and this country, namely, the seizure of the British packet-ship *Trent* by the United States man-of-war *San Jacinto*. On board the *Trent* were two representatives of the Secession Government, Messrs. Mason and Slidell. The British Government demanded the release of the envoys, on the ground that the *Trent* should not have been seized, and that under the British flag the two envoys were immune from capture. The British Government protested. The cry, "They shall never be given up," was universally heard in the United States. Public opinion was stormy and indignant. Then it was that Lincoln, in peril of his own political position, of his influence upon his own people, and at a most critical time in the history of the Civil War, insisted that the seizure was not lawful under International Law; declared that Great Britain was adhering to principles for which the United States had gone to war with her in 1812, and that Mason and Slidell must be given up. In the face of threats and wide-spread anger, Lincoln stood by the principles of International Law, not as a pedant, but as a patriot, to whom the perfect honour of his people and his country was more than all else.

Every effort has been made by Germany, through political pressure by German-Americans, by the incitement of racial feeling cultivated by the German Ambassador and by Herr Dernburg's Publicity Bureau, with its immense ramifications, to move President Wilson towards an abandonment of the strict rules of

neutrality by prohibiting the export of munitions of war to this country. Had President Wilson yielded to this political pressure he would have sacrificed that neutrality which, with a great anxiety and diligent care, his Government has steadfastly preserved. That Germany cannot avail herself of the open market for munitions of war in the United States, is due to the fact that with her great Navy, which for twenty-five years she has steadily developed, she is unable, in the presence of the British naval force, to protect those munitions of war and supplies which she would buy of the United States, if she could. Great Britain's Army on the Continent of Europe is infinitely smaller than that of Germany, and is therefore at a great disadvantage. Germany's Navy is smaller than that of Great Britain, and is therefore at a disadvantage; and the United States would indeed be performing an unneutral act if it sought, by abandoning the ordinary rules of neutrality, to adjust those disproportions between the two belligerents on land or sea by whatever means. The American Government has pursued the only policy possible to a nation desirous of preserving its deservedly high reputation in the field of diplomacy. Its foreign policy has never deviated from the straight line of perfect rectitude in all its history. It has been in tune and sympathy with the highmindedness and sensible idealism of the American people in regard to great events in the world's history as its events march past. The influence of American public opinion is always thrown on the side of right as that opinion sees it, not on the side of prejudice. It can be truthfully said that the American people stand for "Charity to all and malice towards none." It is not surprising, therefore, that all the combatants in this great war desire at least American good opinion, while Germany has desired, not only the good opinion, but an active support—not through armies and navies, but through the manipulation and distortion of neutral rights in her favour.

The use of German-American political influence, and the threat of what it could do, was not a very logical position for a logical nation like the Germans to take up; because if the feeling, or influence, of sections of the American people are to be considered, then, on the basis of the majority ruling, the American Government must have abandoned its strict neutrality in the favour of the Allies; for we are assured from a thousand quarters in the United States that the overwhelming majority of the American people are in sympathy with our cause. That is acknowledged bitterly and viciously by the Germans themselves. There are those, however, in this country who have been as illogical, as unreasonable, and as unwise as the Germans. They have been unable to understand why, when the American people,

by an immense majority, favoured the cause of the Allies, the American Government should remain neutral, or should not completely and openly support the Allies. They cannot understand why the United States should not officially have condemned Germany for its violation of Belgian neutrality. The position is shortsighted and unjust. I do not hesitate to say that the universal condemnation of the violation of Belgian neutrality, with the cruel and murderous treatment of the Belgian people, through a process of official atrocity committed on such towns as Dinant, Aerschot, Malines, Louvain, and Termonde, has in its spontaneity, and freedom from official direction, an infinitely greater effect upon the world than any official reproach, with its carefully worded phrases, could have had.

The newspapers and the people of the United States have been free to express themselves untrammelled by any complications which might have occurred if, for instance, Germany had told the United States to mind her own business on the receipt of an official Note conveying reproach. The reply to the few dissatisfied people here to this would be, " Ah, then, the United States if she were challenged by Germany would abandon her neutrality and take part in the war on the side of the Allies ! " To very many others, however, it is infinitely better for the world's sake, and I believe for our own, that the United States should not abandon her neutrality. It may be that many more nations than are now at war in Europe will be involved before summer has come. In the interests of a stable civilisation it is essential that the steadying, wholesome, dispassionate, and honourable influence of the United States should, unhampered by the terrible restrictions of belligerency, be used in the interests of the whole world, and particularly in the interest of the small nations in the whole world when the end of this war comes. Against militarism, and the results of militarism, the United States is opposed to a man. She will decide—she has decided for herself—whether this nation and this Empire is a militaristic nation and Empire. We do not fear her scrutiny in this regard ; we welcome the closest study of our policy and our practice ; and that is why the vast majority of us in this country feel that the United States can serve the best interests of civilisation by remaining outside the ring of this contest—her Government neutral officially and firmly impartial. That does not mean, however, that the people of the United States shall not be vocal in their sympathy, and individually active, according to conscience, in the support of any set of belligerents.

Conceive what would be the state of Belgium to-day if the United States had abandoned her neutrality in favour of the Allies. Millions in Belgium would be starving. Since August

last the United States has been busy in the interests of humanity, lessening the horrors of war by hospital relief, providing comforts and necessities through an awful winter for the wounded of all the nations engaged; and every week there comes from her shores the especial gifts of each State—ships loaded with flour, and food of all kinds for a people whose land has been denuded, as locusts ravage the fields of ripened grain and leave them bare. If for no other reason the neutrality of the United States should be welcomed by every British man, because of what she had done for suffering, starving, tortured Belgium.

If humanity is indebted to the United States Government for the incalculable service it has rendered in bringing relief to Belgium, how grateful should this country be to the American Government for the services rendered to our thousands of poor prisoners in Germany. The American Ambassadors in London and Berlin, and the whole Ambassadorial staff, have been placed at the service of our suffering wounded and our helpless officers and men, who have had insufficient clothing, insufficient food, and have suffered as no German prisoners have been compelled to suffer in this country. Even at this day, in spite of the proposals made by the British Government for an agreed system of treatment of prisoners by both countries, and in spite of what the American Embassies have done, the suffering still is unpardonably great. It would have been terrible, however, had not the American Embassy officials, with a disregard of all personal considerations or of the labour imposed upon them, performed a daily service as chivalrous as it was insistent for our unfortunate fighting men in captivity.

Few people in the United States conceive that it is the duty of their Government to join in this conflict; but if it were the duty of the American Government to engage in it, and it refrained, it is the American people, not ourselves, who should protest and make their Government do its duty. The American people have a certain prejudice in favour of making up their own minds; and that is why they have resented so strenuously and scathingly the campaign of the German Press Bureau in the United States.

Newspaper men in this country will gallantly agree that the American Press has exhibited the greatest enterprise and shown extraordinary ability in dealing with the war in their editorial columns. We hear more often than is agreeable to those who know the real facts of the sensationalism of American newspapers. Well, in any case, that sensationalism in most cases does not extend to editorial columns. Bold type and leading and catch-headings are no longer the monopoly of the American Press; and sometimes I am not sure whether I am in Broadway or Piccadilly when I open a newspaper in my bed in the morning. When I see

a heading running across a page in type a half-inch in size, I feel that I ought to order a clam-chowder and Johnny-cake for breakfast. The knowledge, information, and capacity which have marked the leading articles in many American papers since the war began are a credit to journalism. The treatment of difficult questions between England and the United States, like that of contraband, purchase of ships, blockade, &c., has been remarkably restrained and courteous—far more so than if the questions were purely local ones and concerned only their own Government.

The American people have made up their minds regarding this war, as they do about most questions relating to countries in Europe, quite independently of any racial prejudice. The American people are not with Great Britain in this war because so many Americans are come of British stock; they were not with us in the Boer War; they do not allow the fact that they speak the English language to influence them in favour of the English. The South spoke English when the North determined to compel it to remain within the Union. No, the American people are with us not because of common racial origin or sentiment, but because they think we are right and that Germany is wrong; because of their hatred of the violation of Belgian neutrality; because they detest the militarism which would impose one civilization and one set of national theories by force of arms upon the rest of the world. Instead of being prejudiced in our favour because of ties of language or of origin, the American people have been largely prejudiced in favour of Germany over many years. They have regarded German Universities as fountains of modern culture, research and disciplined thought. In every important American college are German teachers, or German-taught teachers; and American boys and girls have been educated in Germany by tens of thousands. The American people have had a great admiration for German unity—and Bismarck; they have had a wholesome respect for what they believe to be the homely virtues of the German people as a whole; but they are convinced that the German people have been misled and misdirected by the militarists who have Prussianized Germany and would Prussianize the world.

I have watched American opinion; I have read scores of American newspapers steadily; I have received vast numbers of letters from prominent Americans of all professions and positions in the United States since this war began; and I am convinced that the American people understand this war even better than we do, and their publications show that they understand it. As one prominent American wrote to me, "You are fighting as you never fought before; and we are thinking as we never thought before, not even in the days of our struggle to preserve the Union."

I believe that the American people as a whole see the issues of this war unblinded and unbiassed; and that we have the sympathy of the vast majority of the people of the United States to cheer and strengthen us, and give us heart and hope; and we should let that be sufficient. Were we deprived of that sympathy it would be like a giant substraction from our material resources. The American Government is neutral, but millions of Americans abandoned their personal neutrality from the first week of the war, and gave us what we need most.

I ask such fellow-countrymen of mine as have been impatient with the Government at Washington, whether they have fully estimated the value of the moral support given to us by the people of the United States. Is there no material power in sympathy? The voice that says outside the ring, "Your cause is just, fight on," gives a higher voltage of energy. Sympathy maketh for understanding, and that understanding was never more valuable than when we departed from the old traditional blockade, and relied upon the United States to see that our interpretation of the principles of International Law had not been changed by the new practice we were compelled to make. Sympathy disarmed suspicion of motive and of act. The withholding of that sympathy by the American people would mean a reduction in our national strength, would close up avenues of moral support worth twenty Army corps.

I received a pathetic letter from a veteran of the American Civil War living in Boston, and owning a name familiar to all Americans. He said: "You want our sympathy. I can understand how much you want it by the extent we wanted yours in our Civil War, and were not secure of it. Well, you have our sympathy with all our hearts."

Nothing that has ever been said upon this matter of international sympathy and moral support has the meaning and poignancy of the reply of Abraham Lincoln on the 19th of January, 1863, to an Address from the working men of Manchester. These are Lincoln's words:—

> "It is not always in the power of Governments to enlarge or restrict the scope of moral results which follow the policies that they may deem it necessary for the public safety to adopt. I have understood well that the duty of self-preservation rests solely with the American people. But I have, at the same time, been aware that favour or disfavour of foreign nations might have a material influence in enlarging or prolonging the struggle . . . I have, therefore, reckoned on the forbearance of nations. Circumstances—to some of which you kindly allude—induce me especially to

expect that if justice and good faith should be practised by the United States they would encounter no hostile influence on the part of Great Britain. It is now a pleasant duty to acknowledge the demonstration you have given of your desire that a spirit of amity and peace towards this country may prevail in the councils of your Queen, who is respected and esteemed in your own country only more than she is by the kindred nation which has its home on this side of the Atlantic."

So much for the value which Lincoln placed upon the moral support offered by public opinion. But on another question in the same message he was equally lucid and convincing. Americans should remember what Lancashire suffered in the American Civil War through the blockade enforced against the South, and that these very Lancashire men, suffering from unemployment and on the verge of starvation, still had the courage and magnanimity to offer their sympathy to Lincoln's Government, which was cutting them off from work and food. To their noble utterance, this was Lincoln's reply:—

"I know and deeply deplore the sufferings which the working-men of Manchester, and in all Europe, are called to endure in this crisis. It has been often and studiously represented that the attempt to overthrow this Government, which was built on the foundation of human rights, and to substitute for it one which should rest exclusively on the basis of human slavery was likely to obtain the favour of Europe. Under the circumstances, I cannot but regard your decisive utterances upon the question as an instance of sublime Christian heroism, which has not been surpassed in any age or in any country . . . I do not doubt that the sentiments you have expressed will be sustained by your great nation; or, on the other hand, I have no hesitation in assuring you that they will excite admiration, esteem, and the most reciprocal feelings of Friendship among the American people. I hail this interchange of sentiment as an augury that, whatever else may happen, whatever misfortune may befall your country, as my own, the peace and friendship which now exists between the two nations will be, as it shall be my desire to make them, perfected."

Here and there in this country it has been said that the United States kept silence officially when Belgium was invaded, but became agitated and vocal when American commerce was touched; that she was chiefly concerned in making money out of this war. It is not really necessary to reply to such foolish statements; but if it were, the critic could be reminded that again and again, when other countries have been at war, Great Britain has been

charged with commercial selfishness and anxiety to secure advantage and make money out of other people's troubles; and it is perfectly true that in the early part and the middle of last century Great Britain did profit by the wars which upset the trade and commerce and industry of other countries. It is not necessary to dwell upon this point. I do deeply trust that the United States will increase the production of her soil and the production of her workshops while this war is on and when it is over. Her prosperity at this time would be an advantage and not a disadvantage to the belligerents. It is essential that the United States should have a population at peace, cultivating the soil, developing industry, while Europe is in a state of war; that at least one Great Power shall not be building up thousands of millions of debt and living on credit; shall be free from the direct disturbance of finance, caused by the peremptory and formidable necessities of war. The vast majority of the people of this country profoundly believe that, if it could choose, the American nation would not have this war though it meant a tenfold increase to its prosperity. The almighty heart is still stronger in the United States than the almighty dollar. The American people may rest assured that in this country the immense majority are deeply and profoundly grateful to them for their chivalrous and genuine sympathy; not only because it is sympathy, but because the American people have made up their minds that we are right and that our enemies are wrong in this war; that our aims were peaceful aims, and the purposes of our enemy were purposes of warfare for territorial and material gain. We should have had many searchings of conscience if the judgment of the American people had gone against us at this time. Removed from European complications, the United States is a great court of equity, and its judgments are invaluable to the nation that wins its approval, and secures from it the verdict of acquittal of crime against the peace of the world. For such a judgment we are thankful. We are convinced that in the years to come we shall have to be more to each other than we have been in the past. In the main issues of national life and conduct we do not differ. Our constitutional and political methods are not similar, but our responsibilities and aims are the same. We seek to extend our civilisation by the attributes of peace, not the arguments of the sword. We must come closer together in the interests of the world.